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JOINT MEDIA RELEASE

Doctors back call for independent authority to fix Australia's private health system

The Australian Society of Ophthalmologists (ASO) and the Australian Medical Association (AMA) have today backed a motion by Independent MP Andrew Wilkie MP calling for an independent authority to oversee the private health system.

The motion, to be introduced in federal Parliament today, notes that private hospitals perform more than two-thirds of planned surgeries in Australia, yet hundreds of thousands of Australians are downgrading their cover as its value erodes.

Seconded by Dr Monique Ryan MP, the motion also warns the government's cut to the seniors' private health insurance rebate will speed up that trend and pile further pressure on the public system.

The proposed Private Health System Authority would sit in the health portfolio and act as the system's first independent referee.

It would track the sector's financial health, from premiums to the viability of regional hospitals, and make sure contracts between private health insurers, hospitals and doctors are fair.

Most importantly, it would judge insurer arrangements and their real effect on patient choice and clinical care, not their stated intent, and advise government on how to lift coverage and oversee the safe, properly funded growth of care outside of hospital.

Quotes attributable to AMA President-elect Dr Michael Bonning

“The AMA first called for an independent authority to oversee the private health insurance sector in its Prescription for Private Health Insurance in 2020, and the need for this body is now even more urgent.”

“Without meaningful reform of the critical private health sector, and an independent umpire to oversee that reform, Australians will continue to pay the price for a private

system weighed down by outdated policy settings, inconsistent rebates, and a public hospital network under significant strain."

"An independent body would bring together stakeholders to enact urgently needed reforms to safeguard the viability of private healthcare and knit together regulatory functions currently delivered by disparate departments and agencies, while removing government from its conflicted role of regulator and policy maker."

Quotes attributable to ASO President Dr Peter Sumich

"For too long, the private health system, which is worth over $30 billion, has followed the law of the jungle. Unless you're inside the system, you have no knowledge of or insight into its workings. Mr Wilkie's motion would allow a Commissioner to shine a light on this murky area.

"Every provider group, hospital and industry body is keen to see a Private Health Authority with a Commissioner at the top. The only group voicing opposition is the private health insurer lobby, because they have plans for vertical integration and US-style managed care. They are lining up all the dominoes to make it happen.

"Australians who pay for private health insurance deserve confidence that the system is fair, transparent and working in their interests. Independent oversight is the best way to protect that trust and secure a sustainable future for private health care in this country."

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